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ABSTRACT

Composition instructors at two-year colleges embrace a large array of approaches and pedagogies, and forming a "teaching community" among these instructors is both a rewarding and a challenging commitment. The positive and negative implications of such a community were examined in a case study of one community college using questionnaires and interviews. First, it was found that a "community" of some sort has always existed at the college studied. There was an unspoken agreement among those who had come to that department from the sister college, an agreement not to interfere, criticize, or gainsay each other. The election of a division chair and her subsequent attempt to gather opinions concerning the department strengthened a sense of community. The crisis of a news report denouncing the college's writing program also fostered community, as did the hiring of "new blood." Perhaps the turning point was the departmental retreat, at which goals, standards, and curriculum development were discussed. Currently, the Language Arts faculty members of this college are united as never before. The impact of the community of writing instructors at the college has been felt specifically in a number of ways, especially by improving sensitivity to and communication with the teacher's students. However, some are still left out of such communities, as the comments of adjunct instructors demonstrate. Still, building a community of teachers clearly improves the quality of instruction and working environment. (An interaction diagram of the college's English faculty is included.) (HB)

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Teaching Communities and Two-Year Colleges: Establishing Dialogue Among Composition Instructors

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The title of English instructor does little more than identify potential members of a shared community in two-year colleges. Like anywhere else, composition instructors at two-year colleges embrace a large array of personal teaching approaches and writing pedagogies. Thus one's personal approach to teaching composition affects his/her ability to work with peers when establishing a meaningful "teaching community," one that not only addresses student needs in the ever changing classroom demography, but also fosters communication among peers. What sort of communities of English instructors form at two-year colleges, who belongs to them, and how do they influence matters like department exit standards (or lack of them) and encourage the development of innovative teaching methodologies?

Precisely, what is a community of writing instructors? Need they share common beliefs, common goals, and common teaching methodologies? Or is the existence of some sort of common bond enough to establish a community--and if so, how might it positively or negatively impact the way writing is taught?

Previous Use of 'Pedagogical Community'

As David R. Russell explains in "Writing Across the Curriculum in Historical Perspective: Toward a Social Interpretation," there are "two implications of the concept of community (a discourse community of any kind). First community implies unity, identity, shared responsibility. Second, it implies exclusion, restriction, admission or nonadmission" (53). Both positive and negative implications definitely apply to my findings. I examined these questions about community in a case study of one community college using questionnaires and interviews to develop a sociogram and some tentative hypotheses about community--past and present--among Language Arts faculty.

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I selected for my observation and analysis the language arts discipline at a California community college I shall call Western Community College (WCC), organizationally linked into a two-college district and located in one of the largest cities in Northern California. WCC enrolls about 14,000 students, has been in existence about 17 years, and employs about 105 full-time faculty and approximately 250-300 part-time faculty to teach. The language arts discipline encompasses 23 full-time and 50 part-time faculty.

My research utilized the methods of interviews, surveys, and participant observation over a period of about eight months. My main objective was to contrast the interactional patterns prevalent during the first fifteen years of this college's existence with those patterns that have emerged in the last two years--in response to a significant crisis that is described further in the section, "Crisis Creates Community". I attempted to survey all instructors teaching in the language arts discipline with a questionnaire that inquired into (1) interaction preferences, past and present, and (2) professional and social characteristics of respondents. My response rate was 60%. On the basis of the questionnaire results, I interviewed in depth several persons who emerged as representative of various factions, or sub-communities. Their importance was indicated by a sociogram of interaction patterns which was drawn from questionnaire responses. For 11 years I had taught in the WCC language arts discipline as a part-time instructor. In the academic year 1990-91, I became a full-time faculty member--one of those new resources I refer to--and have attended all meetings of the group as a participant-observer since that time.

This research question is exploratory, reaching for hypotheses that reflect the changes over time among the members of this language arts discipline as expressed in their interactional patterns and organizational decisions during a major transition.

The Old Community Contract:

The Unspoken Agreement

First and foremost, I found that a "community" of some sort has always existed at the West Coast Community College I studied. The English Department was originally comprised of

faculty members from its sister college. As the story goes, the faculty members were either "outcasts," "innovators" (and therefore misfits), or simply "disenchanted professionals" who were tired of departmental politics at the other college. WCC's sister college--the place the original department members came from--did have an English Department. However, that very department and the way it (or specific individuals) attempted to narrowly channel the way composition should be taught made sharing innovative teaching strategies impossible. Indeed, one individual in that established English Department was the single most influential reason many of the English instructors requested a transfer to the new campus, WCC, and he single- handedly seemed to have destroyed any existent writing community. The move to a new college was seen as an opportunity to teach without having to play games. WCC did not have an actual English Department for 15 years, nor was there any great push on the part of the faculty to establish one.

There seemed to be an unspoken agreement--a contract based primarily on individualism--between those who came to the new campus. The crux of that *unspoken agreement* or *contract* was not to interfere in each other's courses, not to criticize peers for their personal pedagogy, and not to create an environment that would perpetuate the sort of department problems (backstabbing, grandstanding) they had left at their former college. In short, composition instructors agreed to respect one another as professionals and individuals; this mutual respect--if not academic privacy--was the cornerstone of their community. Indeed, it was the basis for their identity and initial unity. The dialogue about change was never an issue. No English Department existed; composition instructors were spread throughout the campus in "clusters."

Each cluster was divided into centers, and a center coordinator scheduled all the classes (mixed subjects). As time went on, there *seemed* to be less and less communication, particularly about writing issues. No one wanted or was willing to breach the "unspoken agreement," and as a result, what took place in the composition classroom began to lack any sense of continuity.

The Roots of the Writing/Language Arts Community at WCC

In the Spring of 1991, instructors of traditional Language Arts classes (reading, writing, literature, ESL) elected their first division chair. A popular, friendly individual, Anna, the chair, was someone most people trusted or thought they could trust. As indicated by my survey, Anna's opinion was perceived by the majority of the department as the one that counted the most with others. However, when asked, "Whose opinion matters most *to you*?" the Chair's popularity factor was cut in half. This suggested two things: One, individual liaisons were still quite important; Two: Perception as much as reality was her power base. Regardless, once elected, Anna set to work with other "key opinion leaders" and began to assess the forthcoming Language Arts Division and its needs. She asked everyone in the division to send her a note about what he/she considered the most pressing matter facing the fledgling department. These were read, categorized, and finally worked into topics/issues which would be addressed at length during the break out sessions of the first "genuine" Language Arts Retreat.

Crisis Creates Community

The retreat, Anna, and other "key players" alone were not responsible for "a new way of thinking among the faculty." There were other contributory causes, including a general restructuring of the college, a letter criticizing department standards from the engineering department at a local university, and an embarrassing article which was written in a local paper. The article certainly helped to loosen the foothold of those who were deeply rooted in the past--those sharing the "unspoken agreement." The news article noted a study which seemed to indicate that transfer students from WCC and BCC (BIG CITY COLLEGE) did very poorly on the Writing Skills Test--a junior writing proficiency test. One might say a crisis had been finally acknowledged, and this made change easier for its need had become undeniable.

Since Language Arts instructors remain scattered all over campus, The Language Arts center at WCC still exists only on a chart. However, plans are in the works for a departmental office. What is important to note is that under the previous "cluster" organization of the campus,

there was no sense of *common identity* among Language Arts Instructors. Even now many center members carry a strong identification with sub-communities. A total of three overlapping sub-communities were found at WCC: a community of English Literature and Composition instructors, a community of ESL instructors, and a community of reading instructors.

Did the organizational restructuring of the college play that large a part in helping a community of writing instructors to ***gel*** at WCC? Maybe, but that is not to say that an authentic community will evolve just because a department exists. There must be a give and take atmosphere--interaction (though not necessarily consensus) between members of the community .

New Resources: Responding to the Crisis

Still another factor which contributed to the development of the college's community of writing instructors was "new blood" in the department. Since 1990, WCC has employed four new writing instructors and since 1987, two FTE English Instructors retired and two FTE have gone part-time. The new positions included: (1) a composition/literature instructor, (2) a composition/writing center co-director, (3) a writing center director, (4) an English-for-Spanish-speakers instructor. The new instructors brought fresh ideas and expertise to the college--knowledge and insights gleaned from their former experiences and up-to-date readings. As one might expect, there was a bit of grumbling from a couple of full-time instructors when recently hired faculty members spoke with authority on such issues as the "retention and transfer" of underrepresented, underprepared students. However, because of a sense of crisis brought about by a news article, even the most vocal senior faculty members became willing to work with others and ceased to insist that they knew all the answers.

A Turning Point: The Department Retreat

When the Language Arts members finally had their retreat in the the Spring of 1991, it marked the beginning of a new or renewed *community of writing instructors*. At the retreat, the instructors established some goals, including updating exit standards, devising common

department final essay exams, and revising or developing new curriculum for all composition courses (ESL and standard English courses alike) for what would officially become the Language Arts Center. *The old community contract was no longer acknowledged . . . .*

The Present Community Contract

A comparison of past and present sociograms demonstrates that currently, the Language Arts faculty members at WCC are united like never before. In the past, instructors predominantly were in isolated pairs. Many others indicated total isolation by not responding at all to questions like *With whom do you like to discuss trends in teaching writing?* Or *Name the instructors with whom you liked to discuss theories or methodologies of writing in the past?* In fact, I received more "no response" answers to questions directed at the past than any other. In contrast, my sociograms of present relationships in the Language Arts indicated a well developed network of interaction within the discipline. Is the current cooperation and communication of Language Arts faculty due to the existence of a community of teachers working together? Possibly. Whereas WCC existed for fifteen years as an institution where fellow writing instructors were essentially isolated from each other and were seemingly content to be so, the emergence of a "composition community" brought new life and vitality to the department. My observations and research led me to conclude that as long as instructors maintain a pro-active stance on topics and issues pertaining to writing and writing programs, they may avoid "knee-jerk responses" every time they are confronted with new approaches to teaching.

The Impact of a Community of Writing Instructors at EVC

Establishing and Reinforcing Department Goals

With the establishment of a community or writing instructors:

1) Instructors now share information (gleaned from conferences, journal articles, and personal experience) about different teaching pedagogies--and their appropriateness

to our diverse student body--on a weekly basis at composition curriculum development meetings.

2) Disagreements have not been detrimental to the forward progress of the Language Arts Department. As Joseph Harris put it, "One does not need consensus to have community. Matters of accident, necessity, and convenience hold groups together as well" (20). That does not mean that consensus has not been important at times, but its absence did not preclude the possibility of"group unity."

3) Writing instructors have been able to effectively interact with different segments of the Language Arts Discipline which teach writing (e.g. , ESL and reading). Such interaction has proven fruitful. Evidence from the questionnaires and interaction patterns demonstrated at composition curriculum development meetings that a closer association with the ESL department, for instance, has exposed the English instructors to a method of assessment and placement which includes a faculty advisor and a writing sample.

4) WCC's composition curriculum development committee has established a writing continuum, a curriculum project which required the participation and cooperation of all parts of the Department.

5) The writing instructors have implemented a holistically scored common department final for basic writing, ESL and freshman composition classes. In addition to its use as an assessment instrument, the final exam serves many important functions:

   a) Students realize that they "write to be read" and not to please one instructor. That is, students become answerable to a larger writing community, not one instructor; in fact, they will get honest feedback on their writing competency from no fewer than three English instructors a semester.

   b) This common activity, once a semester, enables instructors to see themselves not as isolated professionals but members of a larger, unified group with similar goals--and reinforces a mutually agreed upon set of exit standards (not approaches

to teaching but outcomes). In the past the English Department at WCC never had-- or wanted-- such a thing.

c) In essence, instructors have a stronger sense of responsibility to their students and towards themselves; for, ultimately, they are answerable to each other and to the Language Arts department's commitment to student empowerment and writing excellence.

NOTE: The acceptance of a department final has now become a part of the curriculum because members of the writing community initiated it. (Formerly an administrator had attempted to implement standardized writing tests without ever consulting any English instructor.)

This sense of belonging to a "community of writing instructors" served well when composition instructors undertook the task of rewriting 15 years worth of traditional practices in EVC's writing curriculum. Furthermore, the establishment of a "community of writing instructors" has had a positive impact on the way writing has been taught. How? Why? Interaction among writing instructors has encouraged dialogue and challenged *age-old* ideas, dated in terms of sound, effective approaches to teaching composition (e.g., "learn grammar and you will know how to write well"). My research revealed that many instructors who previously had only lectured to their students are now using collaborative learning techniques. There were others who used to assign a set number of graded essays to their students every semester but now are experimenting with portfolio assessment. Over the past semester, traditional readers/anthologies have been replaced by those which offer a multicultural perspective on great literature. Such changes may come about when department members begin to share a sense of community based on shared norms and goals. In short, greater communication among writing instructors can only improve sensitivity to and communication with one's students.

Boundaries to a Community of Writing Instructors

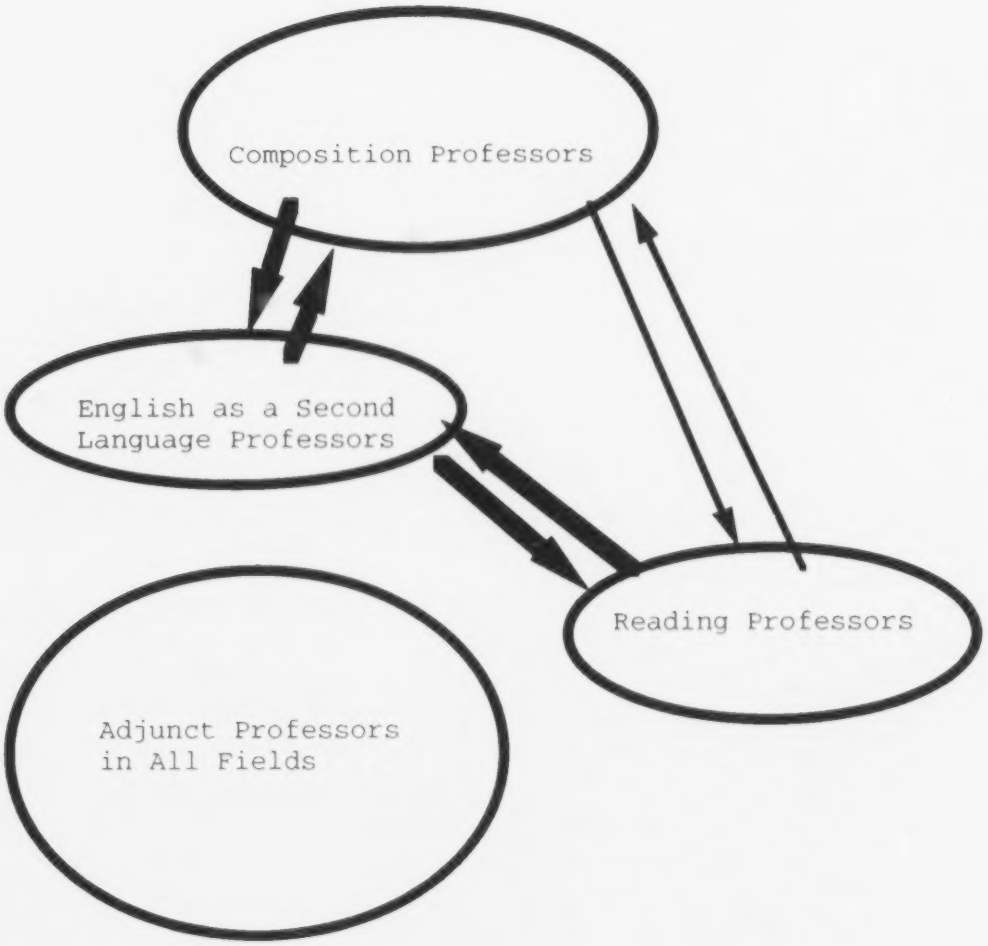
Restricting my research of English discourse communities to writing instructors in the Language Arts has been rather difficult for a number of reasons. First and foremost, not everyone in the Language Arts discipline considers himself/herself strictly a writing instructor. ESL instructors, for instance, frequently teach classes in pronunciation, listening, and thinking skills in addition to composition. Second, while several reading instructors who firmly believe in "the reading/writing connection" consider themselves writing instructors, other reading specialists felt my questionnaire addressed questions outside their realm of expertise. The coordinator for the reading program, for instance, sent me a note--in lieu of a completed questionnaire--and said, "I tried to answer your questionnaire again after our brief discussion. There were too many that did not seem to fit for me--sorry I was not able to help". The diversity of responses merely tends to substantiate the notion that at every level, overlapping discourse communities do exist. However, individuals will respond to and cross over from one community to another with different levels of comfort--different feelings of belonging.

Has Anyone Been Left Out of the Community?

Adjunct instructors are still disadvantaged. Adjunct instructors have not theoretically been excluded or restricted from becoming part of the community of writing instructors, of course. Indeed, we have weekly curriculum development meetings and everyone is invited, full-time and adjunct instructors alike. Moreover, we've made all materials concerning our composition program available to our part-time writing instructors. Still, part-time instructors are rarely able to participate in department matters as much as they might like to for a number of reasons: **1)** Time Conflicts, **2)** Responsibilities-Classes--At Other Colleges, **3)** On The Road or Otherwise Engaged During The Day Which Is When Curriculum Development Meetings Take Place. (The preponderance of WCC adjunct writing instructors teach during the evening and at satellite campuses.) Following are some typical comments made by adjunct instructors:

- "Part-time teachers rarely have the opportunity to communicate with colleagues. We have no common area--other than meetings--where we can go to discuss writing. It would be advantageous if we did."
- "I see no one, ever. The sense of isolation I have experienced here at EVC is by far the most unpleasant and discouraging part of teaching here."
- "(Questions) nos. 17 and 18 assume part-time teachers have opportunities to discuss writing. In my experience, writing teachers exchange pleasantries in passing, but that's about it. There is no opportunity for such discussions."
- "How do you determine 'respect' from a professional point-of-view if you have no idea how they [other writing instructors] go about teaching composition?"
- "This questionnaire is extremely difficult for a member of the "adjunct" faculty to answer! How many people do we see (pending our schedule) and the time various meetings take place?"
- "Some of the teachers I feel comfortable with and see more often are not members of the English department; yet, we discuss students, strategies, teachers, etc."

While adjunct writing instructors belong to a category of instructors, generally speaking, they are not part of the community of full time-writing instructors--or a sub-community of it--because there is no interaction . . . . Since a large number of classes are instructed by adjunct teachers, exclusion from the community of writing instructors will have serious consequences in a writing program--especially if and when the program or curriculum is going through changes. Therefore, regardless of the advances since the Fall of 1991 in the Language Arts at WCC due to an effective community of writing instructors, we have a long way to go before everyone feels a part of it. If anything, such information should give us even more reasons to continue to work on ways to bring the adjunct instructors into the community. After all, an adjunct instructor is far more than someone who teaches classes and leaves the campus.



WEST COAST COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Language Arts Communities:
Simplified Interaction
Diagram

Concluding Remarks

The conclusions based on my case study are neither neat nor definitive. Building a "community" of writing instructors at WCC has definitely improved the quality of instruction and encouraged the variety of methods one may effectively use to teach the composition process--at least among full time writing instructors. Indeed, a writing community at EVC has not encouraged conformity as much as an appreciation of diversity in teaching styles--but for how long? As formerly stated and clearly demonstrated by both the information I received through interviews and the sociogram based on my questionnaire, departments do not create communities--though they may provide a basis for a common sense of identity. Just as with adjunct instructors, identifying with another because he or she teaches English indicates a commonality but does not constitute a community without interaction.

What factors will influence or sustain WCC's community of writing instructors in the years to come? Will the advantages of such a community remain clear? Will the current bond be broken by apathy or indifference? An "unspoken, unwritten" contract has been broken once--for the better--at WCC, but will it always be so? Will there need to be an ongoing sense of crisis to maintain the community of writing instructors? How can adjunct instructors assimilate into the community? Will the role of the adjunct instructor need to change? These and other questions will undoubtedly be examined as we move on into the 21st century and continue to explore how communities of writing instructors do or do not affect the way writing is taught at community colleges throughout the United States--not just at WCC.

Because this research is exploratory in nature, seeking to develop hypotheses about the nature of community among instructors of writing and other language arts faculty, its conclusions, therefore, strictly apply only to the case of Western Community College. The goal was to make some tentative observations about the impact of major changes in the organizational life on this presumed community of writing--and other language arts--instructors.

Originally these conclusions were presented orally, in concert with studies done on university graduate teaching assistants and novice instructors in a secondary school writing

program, for comparative purposes and stimulation of further research. This material was presented by the author at the 1992 CCCC Program "Communities of Teachers: Three Social Contexts for Teaching Composition." Obviously, more investigation is required before my conclusions can be properly applied to the situations of other colleges or educational institutions.

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